DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 253 465 SO 016 163

AUTHOR	Cook, Kay K.
TITLE	Controversial Issues: Concerns for Policy Makers. ERIC Digest No. 14.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Boulder, Colo.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Jun 84
CONTRACT	400-83-0012
NOTE	4p.; References contain small print that may not reproduce clearly. For related digest, see SO 016 159.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/ChESS, 855 Broadway, Boulder, CO 80302.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Controversial Issues (Course Content); Court Litigation; Curriculum; *Curriculum Development; Decision Making Skills; Definitions; Educational Needs; Educational Objectives; *Educational Planning; *Educational Policy; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Literature; Problem Solving; Science Instruction; Social Studies; State Courts; Student Motivation; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Supreme Court

ABSTRACT

Intended for educational policy makers, this publication considers the teaching of controversial topics. Specifically discussed are what issues are considered controversial, why controversial topics should be taught, court decisions, ways educators can prepare for community response or complaints, and questions to address when making curriculum decisions. Generally speaking, an issue that tends to create polarized viewpoints many be considered controversial, e.g., sex, nuclear warfare, and religion/science conflicts. Curricular areas most likely to create controversy are literature, social studies, and science. The discussion of controversial issues in K-12 classrooms counteracts student apathy and allows students to learn and apply decision making and problem solving skills. The Supreme Court and lower courts tend to uphold the rights of teachers and students to engage in controversial topics. Major court decisions are briefly described. Schools should have official policies concerning the teaching of controversial issues, and teacher training should be provided. When developing curricula, decision makers should consider questions such as: (1) What inculcates creative, critical thought in children? and (2) Who determines public school standards? (RM)

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CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES: CONCERNS FOR POLICYMAKERS

EPIC Digest No. 14

Kay K. Cook

ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education

Boulder, Colorado

June 1984

SO 016 163

ERIC

Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education
855 Broadway
Boulder, Colorado 80302

ERIC Digest No. 14
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CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES: CONCERNS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Increasing public concern over subject matter and teaching approaches in the public schools requires that educational policymakers be prepared to deal with the issues that arise. Specifically, the introduction of controversial topics or materials into the curriculum requires careful and thoughtful planning. While most educators would agree that "the open examination of controversial issues can promote positive, democratic political attitudes" (VanSickle, p. 63), some people suggest that controversy has no place in public education.

This ERIC Digest considers the rationale for teaching controversial issues; subjects, content areas, and teaching approaches that are considered to be controversial; major court decisions affecting controversial topics in the schools; ways in which educators can prepare for community response or complaints; and questions to address when making curricular decisions.

What issues/curricular areas are considered controversial?

Generally speaking, an issue which tends to create polarized viewpoints may be considered controversial. Philosophically, controversy can be defined as follows:

> Important ideas in human experience explain significant values, generate other ideas, produce revolutionary consequences, and attract allegiance and condemnation in equal proportion. Unfortunately, almost by definition, such ideas are controversial (Shermis, p. 33).

Controversial topics usually center on the values and beliefs related to matters often considered private rather than public. Thus, those ideas which either confirm or put into question deeply held values will become controversial. They are usually issues of social significance and have national and international implications. However, issues which do not extend beyond the realm of local concern can be equally significant.

Specific topics which currently create concern on the part of local communities and, to a wider extent, national organizations formed as "watchdog" agencies include:

- sex and sexuality: specifically, birth control, abortion, homosexuality, and "permissive" attitudes toward sexual behavior
- nuclear issues: nuclear power, nuclear weapons, national defense, nuclear disarmament, peace
- religion/science conflicts: scientific creationism, genetic engineering
- challenges to the U.S. government: U.S. foreign policy ethics vis-a-vis intervention in the politics of developing nations, especially Central America

Curricular areas most likely to create controversy are literature, social studies/social sciences, and science. Literature courses in particular have to deal with problems of objectionable language and alternative life styles and values presented in fiction. Social studies courses by their nature deal with issues of social import and thus with highly visible and debated issues. Even science educators must respond to demands for the introduction of "scientific creationism" in their courses.

Finally, the approach to instruction known as "secular humanism," which involves ethical and values instruction, has become controversial from the viewpoint of the Moral Majority, which considers such instruction as "undermining traditional family values" (Lines, p. 4).

Why should educators become involved in teaching controversial issues?

Teaching about controversial issues can have positive effects on students, school climate, and, subsequently, society at large. Discussing controversial issues has been shown to have a motivating effect on students. Such issues are perceived as relevant and allow students to learn and apply decision making and problem solving skills while discussing topics of importance to them.

Specifically, research suggests that discussing controversial issues in elementary and secondary schools will counteract attitudes of apathy that have characterized persons of voting age for the last decade. Two studies (Ehman, 1969, 1977) revealed that increased course content on controversial topics "had a positive effect on students' attitudes toward citizen duty, political participation, and political efficacy as well as their political trust, social integration, and political interest—if the teacher allowed open expression and promoted an open classroom climate" (Hepburn, p. 10).

The implications for society seem clear. When approached correctly, the introduction of topics of overriding concern to our nation and world can serve to develop a citizenry able to deal intelligently and decisively with such issues.

As early as 1951, the Committee on Academic Freedom, National Council for the Social Studies took the position that:

> Free discussion of current issues is, then, the heart of the democratic process. It follows that education for citizenship in a democracy must emphasize the study and discussion of controversial issues and must teach the skills needed for this study and discussion (Cox, p. 26)

Not only, then, should students be allowed to confront issues of import, but also they are to be taught those skills that will allow them to confront and take action on issues that will arise throughout their lifetime.

How have the courts treated cases dealing with controversial issues in the schools?

The Supreme Court and lower courts tend to uphold the right of teachers and students to engage in controversial topics both in curricular and extracurricular activities. Listed below are major decisions concerning controversial topics.

This ERIC Digest was prepared by Kay K. Cook, Staff Associate, ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, June 1984. See also "Teaching About Controversial Issues," ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, September 1983.

Supreme Court.

Epperson v. Arkansas (1968) held that "states may not use the public school curriculum to promote a religious view, although states normally have full authority to set curriculum requirements." In this case, the Court addressed the Arkansas law that prohibited instruction in evolutionary theory.

Tinker v. Des Moines School District (1969) "The Court upheld the right of students in schools to express their views on controversial subjects so long as they do so in the right place and manner." Specifically, the Court upheld the right of the Tinkers (brother and sister students) to wear armbands in protest of the Vietnam War: "In *Tinker* the Court envisioned the public high school as a place for free and open discussion of ideas among teachers and students."

Papish v. Board of Curators (1973) "The Court extended protection under the free speech clause to student editors of a university newspaper."

Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free District No. 26 v. Pico (1982) The Court ruled that the school board must go to trial to show that it had a valid purpose in withdrawing a number of books from its school libraries.

Lower Court Decisions.

Recently, lower courts have ruled that a school board could not remove a film, "The Lottery," from its curriculum; ordered a school committee in Maine to lift its ban on Glasser's book about Vietnam, *365 Days;* voided a 1981 Arkansas law requiring equal time for instruction in creationism; and approved sex education programs in New Jersey with the limitation that individual children could be exempt where the family raised objections based on "sincerely held moral and religious beliefs."

(The preceding information was taken from Lines, Patricia, *Curriculum and the Constitution.)*

Note: An article in the February 1982 issue of *Educational Leadership* points out that since "the 11 federal courts of appeals have not been consistent, the legal status of academic freedom in the classroom varies geographically." (375) The article goes on to categorize the individual federal circuits as liberal or conservative.

How can educators best prepare for community response or complaints about the use of controversial issues in the classroom?

In *The Censorship Game and How To Play It,* author C. Benjamin Cox, who reminds educators that "curricular decisions have a political dimension," emphasizes that:

> Schools can prepare ahead of time for the handling of specific pressures by forming a school/community council on educational practice created for the purpose of advising the board on curriculum matters of interest to the community. (15)
>
> School boards should present to teachers *in writing* any limitations they have set upon classroom materials and methods.
>
> School districts should provide for and require teacher training in the correct/effective approaches to introduce controversial issues in the classroom.

What questions do educators need to address when making curricular decisions?

Curricular decisions are generally made at two levels: states broadly specify subjects to be taught, while local districts add detail and course descriptions to those specifications. When developing or modifying curriculum, educational decision makers should consider:

- What inculcates creative critical thought in children?
- What are the educational implications of narrowing the range of materials available to children?
- To what extent should the age of the child affect decisions about content of curricula?
- Which classes are so value-laden that they should be elective? (Lines, p. 7)
- In which cases are students and teachers protected by First Amendment rights and what actions could be defined as exceeding those rights?

Philosophical questions for educational policymakers to focus on include:

- Who determines public school standards?
- Who determines if these standards are met?
- Are cultural, religious, political, or philosophical differences to be encouraged and incorporated in the public school curriculum?
- Is there ever room for true diversity in a *public* school system?
- Ultimately, who controls the education of children? Does the state's right to have an educated citizenry supersede parents' rights to educate their children as they see fit? (Kincheloe, p. 38)

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This publication was prepared with funding from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under contract No. 400-83-0012. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of NIE or ED.